

**Thomas Pierret, Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 296 pp. \$99.95 (hardback), ISBN 9781107609907**

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May 9, 2018

Thomas Pierret's *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* marks an important intervention into the study of Islam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pierret provides a rich, detailed, thick description of the religious field of Syria from the 1960's to the present, covering the years from the Ba'ath coup to the ongoing Syrian Civil War. In describing the structure of Syria's religious field, Pierret draws on the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu and other sociologists to consider Syria's Sunni 'ulama', their institutions, financial basis, opponents, and strategies in engaging the realm of power.<sup>1</sup> Rather than succumb to the fate promised by modernization theories, the 'ulama' managed to ride the tiger of modernity through financial and institutional autonomy, maintaining relevance to their base, and relative flexibility in adapting to the changes in society. Pierret also explores the different strategies of the Ba'ath state in managing the religious field and the crucial shifts therein, from neutralization and neglect following their coup to "subcontracting" control of the religious field to select 'ulama' after the Hama Uprising in 1982. Pierret's study is an important contribution to the literature on 'ulama' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state, Islamism,

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular Bourdieu's "Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field" in *Comparative Social Research*, Vol. 13 (1991): 1-44.

and the nature of contestation and accommodation between these actors. What follows is not a chapter-by-chapter summary of this important book but rather, my own narrative of Syria's Sunni 'ulama' under the Ba'th, in light of Pierret's book.

The Ba'th Party took power in Syria in 1963 through a military coup and has remained in power since. Initially, the Ba'th seized power with Nasserist generals only to turn on them immediately. The "Neo-Ba'th," a radical socialist and regionalist wing of the party, eliminated the old guard of the party in 1966, only to be overthrown by general Hafiz al-Asad in 1970 with his "corrective movement." Al-Asad and his son have ruled Syria since then. Throughout Ba'th reign, one of the regime's most complicated power struggles has been with the religious field. Their initial policy aimed at neutralizing threats from within the state religious apparatus and then neglecting to support religious institutions. This seemingly came from its vision of secularism, one that can be understood as conforming to modernization theories of the time, maintaining that as scientific learning spread and different spheres of societies were rationalized, religion would slowly and inevitably fade away. This notion is reflected in an incident that lives on in the memory of Damascene 'ulama' as a significant moment in the contestation between religion and the Ba'th state. In 1967, a periodical of the military published an article on "the new Arab man" that disparaged religion, stating that "god, religion, feudalism, capitalism, colonialism, and all values that governed previous societies [will be] nothing more than an embalmed mummy in the museum of history." The 'ulama' responded by leading mass protests in Syria's urban centers. The underlying assumption of the article was clear: as Arabs joined the bandwagon of progress and reached a Ba'thist-socialist utopian future, all other ideologies and power

structures of the past would be overcome. For the time being, however, as the mass protests evinced, the Ba‘th had to manage the vestiges of religion.

The Ba‘th’s attempts at neutralizing then neglecting religious institutions are demonstrated in the way they handled the position of mufti. At the time of the Ba‘th coup, the position was held by Abu al-Yusr ‘Abidin (d. 1981), who served as mufti from 1954. A scion from the ‘Abidin family, Abu al-Yusr was related to Ibn ‘Abidin (d. 1836), the Ottoman judge who authored *Radd al-Muhhtar*, the most authoritative later work on Hanafi law that is still used today. When Syria was part of the United Arab Republic (1958-1961), the Syrian mufti position was closed under Gamal Abdel Nasser’s policies. When the union came to an end, the position was re-opened and Abu al-Yusr resumed his post. Shortly after the Ba‘th coup, however, he was ousted and replaced by an interim mufti. A year later, a committee was formed to vote for a new mufti, and at the last minute the Ba‘th put forth their own candidate and stacked the committee in their favor. Their candidate was a young scholar of Kurdish extraction, Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro (1915-2004), who won the election by a single vote and went on to hold this position from 1964 until his death in 2004. Kuftaro and his office however had no real powers and his role was by and large reduced to a ceremonial one.

Kuftaro fit the Ba‘th project of re-shaping Syria’s political and social elite, and continued policies established under the French Mandate of redistributing power among Syria’s ethnic and religious minorities, thereby disenfranchising Syria’s traditional Sunni Arab elite. The Neo-Ba‘th in particular eliminated scores of Sunni officers and replaced them with ‘Alawis, Druze, and Isma‘ilis, only retaining Sunnis from rural parts of the country. Kuftaro

did not have the requisite social capital needed to rise among the ranks of the ‘ulama’ in that he did not come from the main lines of Damascus’ scholarly families (though Kuftaro’s father was himself a Naqshbandi Sufi and scholar). Also, Kuftaro’s intellectual genealogy did not converge with the scholarly network that dominated the ‘ulama’, namely that which centered around Shaykh Badr al-Din al-Hasani (1850-1935). As an ethnic Kurd, Kuftaro also disrupted the Arab monopoly on the mufti position. Further, aspects of Ba‘th ideology aligned well with Kuftaro’s own views of religious revivalism: presenting an Islam in tune with modernity, particularly in its embrace of interfaith dialogue and co-existence in a multi-religious nation-state. For all these reasons, he was the perfect candidate for the Ba‘th.

Modernization theory seems to describe the fate of the elite class of the ‘ulama’ rather well but fails when considering the religious field as a whole. Under the Ottomans, the highest positions of religious authority — judgeships, administrators of endowments, preachers in cathedral-mosques, etc. — were the monopoly of a cadre of families, such as Kuzbari, Ghazzi, Shatti, Hamzawi, and Ustuwani. As modern education made its way into Syrian society, these families by and large abandoned the religious vocation and moved into different career paths, such as medicine, business, law, and engineering. As a result, these families have virtually no representation in the ranks of late-20<sup>th</sup> century ‘ulama’, whereas a century earlier they dominated the religious field. The Ba‘th, no doubt, contributed to this shift among the traditional elite by ensuring that these positions were closed to members from those families, as Abu al-Yusr’s case demonstrates.

As Pierret argues, the move away from the religious vocation by these families did not weaken the religious field as a whole; rather, this vacuum at the top allowed for newer

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actors outside the traditional elite to emerge. This, along with the fact that the Ba‘th refused to incorporate the ‘ulama’ into their state apparatus, had important consequences. The new religious elite did not rely on the state to finance their enterprise and instead built financial bonds with local merchants, thereby securing relative economic autonomy. This also provided them institutional autonomy, as they were allowed to preserve their method of teaching through master-disciple relationships. Pierret provides a rich analysis of this important relationship between the ‘ulama’, their institutes, and merchants in chapter four, “The Turban and the Chequebook: Political Economy of the Syrian Religious Elite.” From the Mandate to the Islamic Revival of the 1970s, the ‘ulama’ made a convincing case to stakeholders for the relevance of religious education and were able to leverage mass literacy to their advantage to access greater audiences. The education movement in this period (50’s to the 70’s) was remarkably successful. Rather than the decline that modernization theories posited, the ‘ulama’ successfully managed to navigate these socio-political changes to build a base in Damascene society independent of the state.

The figures that spearheaded the education movement, it is important to note, did not necessarily leave behind a rich oeuvre, nor even advocate distinctive doctrinal changes to Islam’s teachings. These ‘ulama’ were not the “Muslim Martin Luthers” for which Western media periodically clamors, and that academics are desperately trying to create. Because of this, the ‘ulama’ have escaped the attention of most Western scholars of modern Syria.<sup>2</sup>

What makes these ‘ulama’ stand out is not innovative doctrine, but rather innovative modes

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<sup>2</sup> Consider the undue amount of attention given by Western academics to Muhammad Shahrour (b. 1938) and, with few notable exceptions (such as Pierret), the neglect of more influential Sunni ‘ulama’.

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of action as they were primarily *murabbīs*—religious authorities and spiritual guides that cultivated and fostered Muslim subjectivities in their students through teaching the Islamic sciences. This spiritual teaching and formation (*tarbiya*) did not have a single trajectory but rather took on different forms.

One trajectory of *tarbiya* was through establishing modern educational institutions. The most successful figure in this respect was Shaykh Muhammad Salih al-Farfur (1901-1986) and his Al-Fath Academy (Maʿhad al-Fath al-Islami), established in 1956. Farfur's institute was concerned with the reproduction of the class of 'ulama' as specialists in religious knowledge. Under the Baʿth, degrees from Farfur's institute were never recognized by the state (a major point of contention) and their graduates could only pursue careers as religious functionaries in mosques. The master-disciple relationship and the study of the didactic canon of Islamic thought were set in an institution that aspired to be modern, with a bureaucracy, formal exams, and degree structure.

Another trajectory of *tarbiya* from this same time period surrounds the work of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Karim al-Rifaʿi (1901-1973). Rifaʿi too was concerned with religious education through the master-disciple relationship, but unlike his peer Farfur, Rifaʿi did not establish a shariʿa institute. Basing himself out of the Zayd ibn Thabit Mosque, Rifaʿi set up numerous learning circles that took the traditional mode of Islamic education in a new direction. Each circle was made up of students of a similar age, background, and education that met weekly to study together under a teacher (Rifaʿi or one of his students). Further, Rifaʿi appealed to the secularly educated students at the state schools and the University of Damascus by offering classes in the mosque that would help them with their studies, in

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addition to their religious learning. In this way, each circle was not merely a study-group dedicated to religious sciences, but a peer-group. Additionally, through a series of charitable organizations, Rifa'i offered opportunities for attendees at his mosque to get involved in the distribution of charity and provide services to less fortunate neighborhoods surrounding Damascus. Rifa'i was thus not primarily concerned with the reproduction of a single class of specialists but sought to ensure that the emerging professionals that would run society had also formed pious Muslim subjectivities rooted in studying the Islamic sciences. His interest was not to produce more 'ulama' and religious functionaries, rather, it was to ensure that the engineer, lawyer, doctor, and businessman too were people of *'ilm*.

The Ba'th inherited one institution that, despite their desire and best efforts, they could not get rid of: the Shari'a College at the University of Damascus. The Shari'a College was founded in 1954 and was meant primarily to train legal experts in matters of personal law, the domain of law to which the shari'a was relegated. One of the chief architects of the college was Mustafa al-Siba'i (1915-1964), who served as its first dean for four years, was a parliamentarian, and head of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. The college added a modernized (though not modernist) dimension to religious learning in Damascus. To make the case against their secular-minded opponents in the University and government, the founders of the college argued that it embodied a modern, anti-imperial, and scientific approach to religion. The emphasis was not on re-creating 'ulama' as custodians of tradition, but rather modern researchers (*bahith*) into Islamic law and thought.<sup>3</sup> What the Sharia

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<sup>3</sup> The professors at the Sharia College, however, did not represent challengers to the authority of the 'ulama', as virtually all of the faculty were trained under the 'ulama'. Outside the college, many of the faculty members continued to teach in mosques in the

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College provided that was different was a way of presenting the teachings of the Islamic tradition in a modern format. Faculty members also functioned as “Muslim thinkers” (*mufakkir islami*), and professors from the college such as Wahbah al-Zuhayli (1932-2015) and Said Ramadan al-Buti (1929-2013) quickly developed international reputations as voices of traditional Islamic teachings in modern form, tackling challenges to Islamic thought and law that post-colonial Muslim states faced.

Finally, it is worth noting that this educational revival extended to women as well. The eponymous founder of Syria’s religious women’s movement, Munirah al-Qubaysi (b. 1933), studied under a number of Damascus’ most prominent ‘ulama’, including the aforementioned Buti, Rifa’i, and Kuftaro. Qubaysi focused on teaching women key Islamic disciplines, such as Qur’anic recitation, prophetic biography, and hadith. Her teaching was consistent with that of the main body of Damascene ‘ulama’ in that it was apolitical, rooted in cultivating pious Muslim subjectivities through learning. She encouraged her followers to be active members of society, and pursue marriage, higher degrees, and careers, particularly in education. Qubaysi’s teaching did not take place in institutes but rather, in people’s homes.

Through these various trajectories of Islamic education—modern shari‘a institutes, teaching non-specialists and newly emerging professionals, the Sharia College, and female-led educational initiatives—Damascene ‘ulama’ were able to reach newer audiences and

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traditional manner. Most significantly, the faculty by and large adhered to the same doctrinal teachings.

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retain their authority as custodians of Islamic learning, even as the state was seeking to neglect investing in religious institutions.<sup>4</sup>

The main challenge to the Sunni ‘ulama’ articulation of orthodoxy came in the form of Salafism. The regnant tradition of Sunni Islam in Syria reflects the development of Sunnism under the Mamluks and Ottomans, dominated by Ash‘arite theology, *madhhab*-based law, and *ṭarīqa*-based Sufism. The earliest articulation of Salafism in Damascus centered around Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (d. 1914), who can best be described as a modernist Salafi. Qasimi was an associate of Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1908) and Rashid Rida (d. 1934) and was one of the pillars in re-thinking Islamic teachings to engage the modern world. Though Qasimi was not as influenced by Western thought as ‘Abduh, they shared a critique of the regnant tradition. Coming from the circles of the Algerian freedom fighter and Sufi, Emir ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza’iri (d. 1883), Qasimi’s Salafism did not reflect the markers of what scholars have termed Purist Salafism, namely Wahhabi theology, anti-*madhhabism*, and a rejection of Sufism. Purist Salafism emerged in Damascus in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, centered around Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 1999). Al-Albani offered perhaps the most serious challenge to Damascus’ orthodoxy. Al-Albani worked on the periphery of the religious field; he was not part of the ‘ulama’ establishment, nor was he interested in serving as a religious

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<sup>4</sup> A tension emerged between those that studied “in the mosque” (*jāmi*), i.e. traditionally, and those that studied “in the university” (*jāmi‘a*). The former saw themselves as not giving in to modern sensitivities and preserving the norms of their teachers, the latter saw themselves as extending the teachings of the ‘ulama’ and placing them on stronger footing. Somewhere in the middle was the professional that frequented study circles like those established by Rifa‘i (and less so Qubaysi). They were able to appreciate the traditional method of learning but also saw the benefit of the “Muslim thinker.” Despite this tension, the religious field was populated by parties that recognized the ‘ulama’ authority and expertise.

functionary, being content earning a humble living as a watch repairman and spending his time researching and writing at the Zahiriyya library. Though he drew a small crowd around him in Damascus and other Syrian cities, the regnant 'ulama' had managed to marginalize his influence in Damascus, while his reputation grew in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf through his publications. Thus, despite an important discursive challenge to their orthodoxy, the 'ulama' managed to retain their authority by keeping al-Albani and his ideas on the periphery.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria presents a complicated relationship vis-a-vis the 'ulama'. Its Syrian representative, Siba'i, came from the ranks of the 'ulama'. Siba'i's own views of Islamic teachings bear the marks of a reformer who was critical of much that passed for religious norms around him, while being eclectic enough to theorize an Islamic socialism. His views however never went as far in their critique of the regnant tradition as those of Purist Salafis like al-Albani. Siba'i's successor in leading the Brotherhood, Isam 'Attar (b. 1927), did not come from the 'ulama' and adhered to Damascene Salafism. In contrast, the leaders of the northern chapters of the Brotherhood, in Hama and Aleppo in particular, tended to be either 'ulama' themselves or were closely affiliated with them. Though the Brotherhood had support and sympathy among Damascene 'ulama', they were embarking on fundamentally different projects—the Brotherhood sought to capture the state, whereas the 'ulama' were concerned with society. In the 1950's, Siba'i and other members of the Brotherhood worked within the political system, running for office, winning seats, and serving as parliamentarians. The Ba'ath coup, however, excluded them (and other parties) from politics, pitting the Brotherhood and Ba'ath against each other as mortal rivals.

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The ‘ulama’ were initially sympathetic to the Brotherhood as champions of religion in the political realm. Thus, political Islam too did not seek to undermine the ‘ulama’s’ authority.

“The Corrective Movement” in 1970—the coup d’état by general Hafiz al-Asad against his fellow Ba‘th members—set the stage for Syrian politics to the present day and heightened the contestation between the Ba‘th and the Brotherhood. One of the many sources of tension between the Ba‘th and the religious opposition was Asad’s ‘Alawi background. For centuries, the ‘Alawis were disenfranchised by various powers in the Syrian territories, deemed an extremist (*ghulāt*) sect by both Twelver Shiites and Sunnis. Asad tried to preempt attacks on his sectarian background by bolstering his Muslim identity through appearing with Sunni ‘ulama’ at major Islamic holidays and the like (not unlike Sadat in Egypt). This did little to silence critics of the Brotherhood and other parties, as the sectarian issue was but one of a series of problems, including single-party rule through the monopolization of power in the Ba‘th, Asad’s blocking of other parties from participating in politics, and the increased securitization of society through the secret police (*mukhabarāt*).

By this time, a faction of Islamist thought in Egypt had been radicalized for the better part of a decade in the standoff between Nasser and the Brotherhood. Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) had written his prison manifesto *Milestones*, condemning the modern nation state as a form of *jābiliyya* (best understood as both barbarism and ignorance, i.e. anti-Islam) that appropriated God’s sovereignty (*ḥakimiyya*). What was needed to re-establish God’s sovereignty, he argued, was a vanguard (*ṭalī‘a*) that would take power through jihad, using violence to topple the regime. While the leadership of the Brotherhood under Hasan Hudaybi (1891-1973) sought to counter the embrace of violence among its younger

members, the genie was out of the bottle and the old-guard could do nothing to put it back in. One of Qutb's Syrian associates from Hama, Marwan Hadid (d. 1976), applied Qutb's ideas to the Syrian context. For Hadid and radicalized Islamists, the Ba' th state was truly apostate because of its 'Alawi make-up, justifying jihad all the more. Hadid formed a paramilitary group that supported armed insurrection against the state, and despite never receiving support from the Brotherhood, his ideas resonated with many members, particularly those in the Brotherhood's northern chapters. After Hadid's arrest in 1975 and death in prison following a year of torture, 'Adnan 'Uqla (1950-1982) took leadership of Hadid's group under a name reflective of their embrace of Qutbist ideology: The Fighting Vanguard (al-Tali'a al-Muqatila). Through targeted assassinations and a massacre of 'Alawi military cadets in Aleppo, they terrorized the Ba' th and Syrian society, raising the stakes against the regime. Eventually, the Brotherhood and other parties were dragged into open revolt. In 1980, the Islamic Front of Syria (al-Jabha al-Islamiyya fi Suriyya) emerged, composed of leadership from the Brotherhood, the Vanguard, and a number of 'ulama'. The Ba' th state was in open war with the "prophets" of the religious field.

The aftermath of the Hama revolt in 1982 drastically re-shaped the religious field. The Ba' th made no distinction between the Qutbist Fighting Vanguard and the Brotherhood, blaming the entire conflict on the latter. They sought to purge Syria of anything remotely related to the Brotherhood, passing the infamous law 49, making membership in the Brotherhood a crime punishable by death. The policy of neutralization and neglect of the religious field did not deliver on the decline of religious sentiment of which they were so confident a few decades ago. It was not enough to exterminate one

element (the Brotherhood), they needed to gain control of the field as a whole. They did so by finding partners among the ‘ulama’ who were critical of political Islam and “subcontracting” them to manage the religious field.

Through his study of the political practices of those in the religious field, Pierret thinks past a simple dichotomy of quietist versus oppositional practices, often mapped on to the ‘ulama’ and Islamists respectively. He suggests that we consider the political practices of ‘ulama’ and Islamists “sectorally,” that is to say, to consider how their practices seek to “influence state policies on issues that are seen as crucial from the point of view of a particular sectoral elite” (163). For the Islamists, the priority is changing the political system structurally: “Their aim is to modify the *central* principles of the monopoly on legitimate violence, changing those controlling this monopoly, the rules governing to whom the power may be devolved, and the general limits of its application” (164). While these are the primary interests of Islamists, they are of little concern for the ‘ulama’ in their daily practices. The sectoral concerns of the ‘ulama’ center on “the management of the goods of salvation,” focusing on “the expansion of religious institutions, the preservation of orthodoxy against ‘deviant’ ideas, and public morality (which they invariably assimilate to female modesty)” (164).

After Hama, the state allowed its subcontractors to manage the religious field in exchange for obedience and buying into the cult of Asad. A number of concessions were made to satisfy the ‘ulama’'s sectoral concerns. In 1982, Kufaro was allowed to form a shari‘a institute, the Abu al-Nur Institute, which broke the monopoly on religious education that al-Fath had and added to the rivalry between the two groups. The state did not put any

money into Abu al-Nur and it was built primarily on the basis of moneys raised by donations. The Qubaysi movement took off substantially as it was affiliated with Abu al-Nur's network of 'ulama' and the state's subcontractors. In this context, one of Syria's most prominent 'ulama' emerged to dominate the religious sphere, Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, who, like Kufaro, was also of Kurdish origin. Buti developed a personal relationship with Hafiz al-Asad and had unprecedented access to the presidential palace for a religious scholar, serving in a sense as its "imam." Buti played the role of mediator between the palace and the religious field, drawing a good amount of criticism for this domestically and internationally. Buti used his position to secure the freeing of thousands of political prisoners, and the opening of the religious field significantly in the later years of the 1980's. He also became the most important "media-shaykhs" of this time, appearing on state-run radio, television, and increasingly in print. Buti's ties to Asad were seen as breaking ranks with the main body of Damascus' 'ulama'. Though they begrudgingly kissed the ring when they were required to and were ready to act "as if" the cult of Asad was true, they never quite sided with the state.<sup>5</sup> The other subcontractors of the 90's included Rifa'i's sons, Shaykh Usama and Sariya, who lived in exile in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of Hama. They returned to Damascus and revived their father's educational, charitable, and service projects with remarkable success. They tried to maintain their independence and distance from the state while taking advantage of their access to further their sectoral concerns.

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<sup>5</sup> On the Asad cult and acting "as if," see Lisa Wedeen, *The Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 67-86.

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After Hafiz al-Asad's death in 2000, the policy of subcontracting was reluctantly continued by his son and heir Bashar. In the early Bashar years, the regime seemingly wanted to bolster its secular voices and disrupt the power of the 'ulama' in the religious field. When Kuftaro passed away in 2004, the regime did not pass the position of mufti to its senior 'ulama', nor even to its subcontractors, but rather, brought in a loyal subject from Aleppo, Badr al-Din Hassun. Pierret details a series of geo-political developments that made national unity a priority over internal contestation. These developments include the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the assassination of Rafic Hariri in 2004, the Jyllands-Posten cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005, and the Hizbullah-Israel war of 2006. Buti was made the imam of the Umayyad Mosque and was able to place key allies as lecturers therein. More significantly, there was an attempt at uniting the voice of the 'ulama' under an umbrella NGO. Taking the name League of 'Ulama' of Bilad al-Sham (harkening to a Damascene organization from the 1950s), the objective of the organization reflected the sectoral concerns of the 'ulama' in that it was primarily to serve as the main source of authority (*marja' iyya*, or "point of reference") for Muslims in the greater Levant. This was meant to provide a united front to counter the turbulent and confusing world of political fatwas that have had disastrous and violent consequences in the region (considering the sectarian violence that rocked Iraq after America toppled Saddam). The League included different factions of Damascene 'ulama', with Buti at the helm along with the Rifa'i brothers, and 'ulama' from the Kuftaro and al-Fath Institutes. Its inaugural meeting was remarkably successful. After that however, internal rivalries prevented the organization from meeting again and rendered the project meaningless.

Leading up to the Arab Spring in 2011, the Bashar regime continued its policy of “protecting secularism” by lessening concessions to religious sensibilities in the public, much to the chagrin of the ‘ulama’. These centered on Qubaysi teachers in public schools, women-only public spaces, and the anti-religious views expressed by local politicians. When the protests of the Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011, a line was drawn among the ‘ulama’.<sup>6</sup> Members of the state religious apparatus (the mufti Hassun, and the minister of endowments, ‘Abd al-Sattar al-Sayyid) and Buti predictably stood on the side of the regime. The ‘ulama’ at the forefront of the religious field tried to maintain a middle position through *naṣiḥa* (moral council), only to be pushed into standing with the opposition as the regime became increasingly violent against protesters. The Rifa‘i brothers, Kurayyim Rajih, Muhammad Yaquobi, and Mouaz al-Khatib, all spoke out against the violent crackdown on protesters, and one by one were forced into exile. Reflecting the Ba‘th’s washing its hands of the recalcitrant subcontractors, on the 27<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan in 2011, one of the most sacred nights for Sunni Muslims, the Rifa‘i Mosque was ransacked by ‘Alawi gangs loyal to the regime (the Shabbiha). The sixty-seven year old Usama al-Rifa‘i was assaulted in the attack. On the other side, regime-loyalist ‘ulama’ were targeted by the opposition. On March 2013, Buti was killed as he was delivering a lesson in a mosque. With Buti’s death, only Hassun and al-Sayyid were left in the regime’s ranks.

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<sup>6</sup> For these developments, see Jawad Qureshi, “The Discourses of the Damascene Sunni ‘ulama’ during the 2011 Revolution,” in *State and Islam in Ba‘thist Syria: Confrontation or Co-optation?* (Scotland: University of St. Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2012), 59-91.

It would be wrong to assume that the religious field of Damascus today is void of ‘ulama’, or even subcontractors. The Ministry of Endowments continues its role as the main arm of the state religious apparatus, and the Fath and Kuftaro institutes both continue to operate. Buti has been crowned the “martyr of the pulpit” in death, and his son Tawfiq plays many of the roles his father played before, though his base is a fraction of his father’s. While Sunni ‘ulama’ remain, the regime has cast Syria’s future increasingly with Iran. Under Bashar, the regime allied itself increasingly with Iran, particularly in reaction to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and more so during the Hizbullah-Israel War of 2006. Pierret and other scholars of modern Syria have noted the “Shiification” in Damascus and religious sites throughout the country in this time. In many respects, the Ba‘th regime was showing signs of exhaustion in the civil war, and there is little exaggeration in saying that Iran, Hizbullah, and Shi‘i militias (composed of volunteers from Iraq and Afghanistan) were instrumental in turning the tide and not only keeping the regime alive but placing it on what appears to be a path to victory. A related change to the religious makeup of the country has been the demographic change of villages and towns surrounding the capital, and the re-settling of Shiites from other parts of Syria in traditionally Sunni areas, and vice versa. It remains to be seen, but Syria increasingly seems to be developing the same relationship with its Iran-backed Shi‘i militias that Lebanon has with Hizbullah, that is to say, a state within a state.

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